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AUTHOR Mayhew, Lewis B.
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ABSTRACT

In many respects higher education since 1968 has been or has been urged to be qualitatively different from higher education prior to that time. Concerns and misunderstandings over the nature and purposes of higher education are produced in part by the urged displacement of the primacy of rationality and cognition by the affective, experiential, and, in some situations, the irrational. Worries about closing college doors are generated through efforts to extend postsecondary education into a social meliorist role. One possible solution is that institutions of higher education could attempt to return to the core function of education for the young, to the supportive function of creating new knowledge needed for education and for rendering limited services that derive directly from the education and research function. Limited resources should go to the young of whatever group, to prepare them to understand, cope with, and eventually control a complex technological society. (Author/MSE)

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The Closing Door: National Tragedy or a Shift in Social Values?

by

Lewis B. Mayhew
Professor of Education
Stanford University

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The assigned title is a bit overdrawn. To use a phrase like national tragedy in connection with American higher education is misleading. After all, it does expend almost three percent of the world's largest gross national product. It enrolls the highest proportion of high school graduates of any nation. It is judged by those who have gone through the system as being reasonably successful. It has created open access institutions (close and cheap) for its large majority of the population. It has, belatedly to be sure, begun to serve Blacks and other minority groups previously excluded. It has accommodated the unexpectedly large enrollments, first of veterans, then of an affluent population with rising expectations, then the products of an increased birth rate and more recently of segments of the population previously ignored or denied access. It has created an extensive and effective system of graduate education - so much so that it occupies a world role similar to that of the German universities in the 19th century. A phrase such as national tragedy seems appropriate only by radically redefining what is higher education, what its purposes and processes are and whom it shall serve.

This paper argues a thesis. It contends that in many respects American higher education since 1968 is or is urged to be qualitatively different from higher education prior to that time. It further suggests that many of the problems which presumably face higher education are derivative of those changes. Thus regional accreditation is currently under more fire than usual because it has had to contend with new practices and institutions which bear but faint resemblance to higher education as understood in the United States since the nineteenth century. Fears for campus autonomy and for the traditional prerogative of the professoriat are in part related to rapid centralization of control in public higher education, and those fears

are intensified through almost as rapid unionization of faculties. Concerns and misunderstandings over the nature and purposes of higher education are produced in part by the urged displacement of the primacy of rationality and cognition by the affective, experiential and in some situations, the irrational. And worries about closing college doors are generated through efforts to extend postsecondary education into a social meliorist role.

From the end of World War II until approximately 1968 American higher education was characteristically consistent with its recent past and, in some respects, with its total tradition. It was designed for the young to prepare them to control a complex, demanding, technological and, to a considerable degree, a democratic society. There were, to be sure, enormous failures. Minority group members (racial, ethnic and religous) and the poor were but slowly accepted into the mainstream. It was rational, academic and stressed the skills of using words, numbers and abstract concepts. It was meritocratic, using, imperfect, to be sure, specific measures of accomplishment, both to allow entry and to indicate progress and performance. It was provided by individuals trained to deal with the substance of collegiate education - the liberal arts, often redefined as general education, and professional work rooted in the several basic sciences. It was offered on a campus on which were located the tools of education - classrooms, laboratories, libraries, museums and the opportunity to interact with younger and older scholars. Its rhetoric stressed words like discipline, rigor, standards, intellectual, reason, achievement, scholarship, excellence, liberalizing, theoretical and academic. It was cautiously egalitarian, stressing that increased proportions of able high school graduates had the ability to profit from attending college for at least two years, but only here and there would the claim be made that everyone did. If anything, the stress during the 1950s and early sixties was on how better serve the gifted than how serve everyone. On campus, in spite of

dislocations produced by rapid growth and the unending tension between faculty and administration, collegiality was a treasured ideal based on generally accepted academic values.

In about 1968 a sudden change took place; at least on the surface of higher education. It is still too early to tell whether the new rhetoric reflects reality for all of higher education or just the gossamer dreams of a few. It was to serve new students which included the poor, the old, the unsuccessful, those of limited and those of different abilities, the remote and those possessed of radically different maturation than the historic one of preparing for leadership. The substance of education was expanded to include virtually all experiences, feeling and emotion, manual skills, sensation, impulsivity, intimate human relations and indeed whatever seemed to interest an individual. And that education could well be provided by work, the military , one's spouse or friend, travel, public libraries and museums, any one who had a related interest or those professionals to whom one went for service, such as one's doctor, lawyer, dentist or priest. The traditional values of rigor, discipline, and abstraction seemed to give way to the values of freedom from failure, self-appraisal and a warm, open and nurturing environment. While this new substance of education was to be orchestrated by professional educators, the centrality of the highly trained professional was reduced and his professional worth and values challenged. Collegiality based on merit gave way to negotiated contracts with seniority based on longevity. Powers of governance shifted from those on campus who lived each day with educational issues to bureaucratic systems headquarters. And even the values of a campus itself, with its stress on interaction as an essential of education, fell victim and the nontraditional theorists urged off-campus learning through independent study, adjunct professors and videotapes and modules.

As phrased this sounds like caricature. But hear a leading exponent of the new. "There is need to accommodate segments of our population as yet unserved - women, returning veterans, retired men and women, inmates. . ." and the like. "Our doubts are leading us to different and less traditional concepts of the values of campus residence. . ." There should be recognition of certain kinds of experience as being educationally valuable and therefore worth credit toward a degree." There are also ". . .new and expanded educational roles being assumed by business, industry, labor, unions, cultural, governmental and social agencies, military commands, proprietary schools, correspondence institutes and others." Individualized learning is also important and consists of two elements: "individualized opportunity, whereby each student searches for the kind of education suitable and necessary for himself, and individual responsibility, whereby each student, having decided on his educational goal and course of action, documents his maturation by satisfactory progress toward his goal."

What really is involved in the question as to whether college doors are closing is this expanded conception as to what higher education is and whom it should affect. Traditional education is already serving close to 85% of the traditional college students, the young, the able, the successful and the economically comfortable. And progress is being made to accommodate the economically disadvantaged and those whose prior education had been deficient. Whether the doors should be opened and whether they can be kept open for all age groups from 16 to 80, for all ability groups and for every shade of interest and maturation - at say the 80% participation rate for each identifiable group - that is the issue.

In answering the question both the origins and the performance of the new vision of higher education should be examined.

First among origins are real democratic sentiments which led people to see that the United States as a society was still stratified and that people shared unequally in the goods, roles and values. Dramatized first by Blacks and then by other minority or excluded groups, the failure of traditional modes of education became apparent and newer ones sought. Better ways should be found to finance the education of the poor. Better ways of organizing and delivering educational services should be discovered to meet the needs of people having different conditions, needs, aspirations, traits and talents. And better ways to appraise the real outcomes of education were needed to facilitate the movement of people back and forth between education and work.

The changes with respect to Blacks in higher education illustrate the dynamics of change which began taking place everywhere. Prior to 1968 and after 1954 it was assumed within institutions and within state-wide and even national planning efforts, that Blacks would gradually be assimilated into higher education. Admissions offices in predominantly white institutions saw no particular reason actively to recruit Blacks, except for the most academically or athletically able. They were typically not interested in academic-risk students, and those few which were, made only the orthodox provisions for them of light course loads, stress on mathematics and English and academic counseling if they desired it.

State master planning during the sixties also failed to make specific provisions for increasing its number of Blacks in colleges and universities, much less other new groups of students. The author, writing in 1969, after having read all state master plans, could remark: few if any state studies focused on how to bring large numbers of Blacks into the mainstream of higher education. Nor did those plans pay much attention to the needs of

the central city. New York was unique in considering a new kind of institution to serve the minorities of the central city, but was not so when the idea was officially rejected. But after 1968 that complacency changed and the changes proved contagious, spreading to force reconsideration of all groups previously, if not excluded, certainly ignored by established higher education. The causes of the change still are obscure, with the student protest, the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., the disenchantment with the nature of the War in Viet Nam, all probably involved.

Added to the democratic, egalitarian sentiment were the serious criticisms of education which emerged during the late 1960s. The student protest movement seemed to say that something serious was wrong with higher education. And that intuition was validated by research and theory which established few benign changes in people produced by formal higher education. The lack of relationship between college grades and subsequent success, the lack of relationship between teachers and courses and student values, and the lack of relevance of formal curricula for people of diverse talents, all could be and were established. The central themes of research and theory were that different age groups, different categories of people and different individuals required different sorts of educational experiences if they were to profit from it. While research on college students may not have been a positive force contributing to actual inclusion of new groups into higher education, it provided evidence for those who wished, for other reasons, to see continued expansion and democratization of the system.

These two forces along could have produced considerable extension of higher education to new groups and some changes in its practice. But very likely they could not have produced the complicated patterns of efforts to extend higher education to everyone, which were made during the very late 1960s and early 1970s.

What is perplexing is that during a period of affluence for higher education, from 1958 to 1968, when resources were really available to support radical expansion of higher education to new groups. this was not done. It is true that junior colleges stressed education for all in their communities, but their major effort and concern remained with the transfer student and with general education. It is also true that rhetoric existed and was used concerning an educating society, and the educational responsibilities to assist in individual self-renewal. And the various national commissions began to speak cautiously about such matters. One of the first policy statements of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in 1968 argued that what the nation needed in the critical years ahead was quality of result and equality of access. But it was really talking about extending orthodox higher educational opportunities to more qualified young people. Note the language. Of the two highest priorities the first was: ". . .to achieve greater equality of opportunity for all able young people, both for their own benefit, and for the benefit of the nation." That goal is a far cry from those uttered just a few short years later to the effect that all ages, races, talents and motivations should be the concern of higher education. One can theorize that had that goal remained stable and accepted, the question of the closing door would never have been raised. The door was gradually opening for relevant groups. New institutions were being built close to where people lived. Both undergraduate and graduate enrollments were being expanded and their needs accommodated. Indeed the physical plant capacity constructed by 1968 proved to have been more than adequate for the sort of enrollment expansion envisioned by the Commission.

The real problem is that after 1968 for some reason or reasons, in a time of a slow down of resources, higher education sought to extend its services, in many different ways to many different groups of people. Not

only should Blacks be served, but so also should the aged, the infirm, the person in mid-career and the person who in middle age just wanted the personal satisfaction of having a college degree. The potential door closing really concerns those groups, not able youth.

Indicative of the paradox as to why, when a leveling off of enrollment pressures from traditional college students could be anticipated and when financing of higher education had become a strain, did a number of expansionist policies become popular? Recall, these things became popular between 1968-1975. College-Level Examination Program, modification of grading methods, academic credit for life experience, some elimination of admissions testing, extended degree programs, expanded adult education programs, independent study, university without walls programs, programs for lifelong learning, the thousand-mile campus, nontraditional learning and programs for new students; all of these served to expand the concept of higher education to such an extent that the phrase was no longer descriptive and the phrase postsecondary education gained currency. It was this sort of activity which resulted in a wide open door which some fear may be closing. Now, one explanation may be that these are all the legitimate educational responses to clearly manifest demand for educational services. And that possibility must certainly be entertained. However, another hypothesis is that they were generated within higher education for organizational purposes.

One hypothesis is the Marxian one that as the number of positions of preferment stabilized or declined at a time of rising expectations throughout the society, the newer notion of providing education for everyone could be used as a pressure valve, giving new groups the feeling that they were being accommodated and prepared for expanding life roles, without endangering the middle and upper-middle class near monopoly on positions of preferment. Earlier the public junior college may have served in this way as well as

serving as a back door for the least able of middle class children to a bachelors degree and eventually to a good job. The spate of new law schools created at a time of stabilizing need for lawyers and the creation of off-campus degree programs in education, at a time when there was a surplus of credentialed teachers, certainly suggest motivation other than to produce practicing professionals.

Another quite potent explanation, not entirely unrelated, which must be considered is that beginning in the late 1960s American higher education began to take on a number of the characteristics of a declining industry - declining at least relative to the prior period of expansion. The indexes were clear. Financial support, enrollments, public regard, all began to falter and a time could be anticipated when absolute declines would be the rule. There were more teachers than positions and that situation would worsen. Already unused physical plant capacity had appeared here and there, especially in private institutions.

Generally, when industries begin to decline they begin to do and experience specific acts and conditions. Leadership begins to age and to lose the joy which comes from expansion. More potential workers are available for the declining number of positions and the surplus hunt for, or try to create positions which are close to or resemble the mainline positions now closed to them. Institutions begin frenzied activities to invent new products and to find new clients or to reattract clients who ceased to seek service. As the decline deepens, there comes widespread distrust of the previously prevailing ideology and a search for new beliefs which might recapture the magic of earlier, happier and expanding times. Older myths are called into question, frequently on the ground that they failed because they had grown too remote from external verities.

Many of the attributes of higher education in the 1970s, whose doors

some sense might be closing, can possibly be explained by the model of education as a declining industry. Whether education is in reality declining, it is perceived by many as being so. First there is a pronounced questioning of the old myths and traditions of higher education as being intellectual, rational and conceptual and offered by individuals sophisticated in the use of those skills. Increasingly higher education is seen as being experiential, emotional, applied, unstructured and undisciplined. Its direction is judged not the concern nor responsibility of those who know, but rather of individual students, of interested laymen, or of people having particular experience or unique life histories or styles. Students can feel what they need and should have it whether the need is supported by reason or not. Since all of life produces change in people, and since the purpose of education is to produce change in people, it follows that life experience and academic experiences can be equated and credit granted. Since not all people possess talent for abstraction, higher education should cater to all talents, be they for feeling, for relating or for manipulation of things.

The economic consequences of questioning old myths and the creating of new ones are obvious for institutions drifting into financial difficulty. Assuming continued demand for credentials in a complex technological society, embracing those new myths in higher education represents a way for organizations to remain in business. During the expanding period a rigorous, academic, comprehensive examination was the way credit was established for out-of-class learning. In the declining stage credit is assigned for life experience in part because new customers would not accept the examination style.

As actually argued or claimed, these matters are not stated so grossly. There is a scholasticism which is used to rationalize rejection of older values. Gould, for example, urged the quite commendable ends of assuring to

each that which is needed for personal development, an education tailored to individual talents and presented in flexible ways congruent with individual life style. Education should be the responsibility of all institutions and of all kinds of people, not just professional and institutionalized education, because heterogeniety of resource is required of heterogeniety of client and need. However, it is institutionalized higher education and educational institutions which orchestrate those other resources and use them in a frequently parasitical way. The heart of the argument is the rejection of the limited values of formal education and a resultant definition of education so broad as to include whatever changes people, be that a visit to court, the dentist or viewing a play, but at the same time retaining the institution as a sound and economic institution.

Rejecting old myths happens because of disillusion, but also to rationalize a search for new markets. Cross made the point well when she pointed out that the traditional student - young, apt, successful and of comfortable means - was enrolling in college in saturation numbers. Eighty-five percent of those so defined are in college. If higher education were to continue to expand, it would be by serving new students - the not so young, the less able, the less successful and the less economically comfortable. Note she did not question whether higher education should expand. Since these had different needs, conditions and resources, higher education should adapt to those differences, regardless of the deviation from traditional practice. The point is exemplified in hundreds of individual institutions. Fairhaven College was created as a highly academic cluster college only to find its space and services were not needed. The answer was to shift focus and to search for new clients, such as urban poor, retirees, and youth searching for new life styles, all of whom generated financial support from the state of Washington. The University of San Francisco helped solve its budget

deficit problem by offering, through a for-profit organization, bachelors degree programs for police officers with as much as 90 credits awarded for prior experience or for continued service on a police force. Even highly regarded research universities suddenly sought new markets, if those new markets did not jeopardize the image of selectivity.

When higher education was an expanding indsutry with increasing demand for its services, it could ration those while still increasing prices. This it did through admissions testing and the use of other selective devices. However, at the same time that the general slowdown began, different attitudes became apparent. Entrance requirements in many institutions were allowed to change either through lower expectations from traditional measures or through using new and more subjective admissions criteria. New institutions were created, frequently by professionals no longer needed in traditional institutions, with virtually no admissions requirements, not even a high school diploma. The rationalization was to give everyone a chance. The economic purpose was to attract paying clients, especially if they brought with them tuition funds provided indirectly by the federal government.

The creation of new institutions from 1968 onward is an intriguing phenomenon, especially in the light of anticipated decline in demand and resources. At a time when traditional private higher education encountered a serious cost-price squeeze; perhaps as many as 150 new private institutions were created, for the most part dependent on tuition alone for survival. How these fit into the model of a declining industry presents a problem. But one explanation is that they typically were created and conducted by individuals who had become marginal with respect to orthodox higher education. They wished to remain affiliated with higher education and the best way to do so was to create a new institution and to design a product comparable in appearance to the standard product, but which would sell for considerably

less. All of this would, of course, be rationalized through egalitarian rhetoric and by the new and expanded conception of education. But central was an economic element.

In declining industries those who have jobs seek to hold them and to deny new people from entering. And this is clearly illustrated by the growth of unionism. A seeming contradiction is the phenomenon, which developed at about the same time, of rationalizing and using part-time and untrained people in professional capacities. Some of this is institutional response to the cost question. It is cheaper to use part-time and less qualified people than to use fulltime and appropriately credentialed ones. The economic element can be obscured by the claim that such people can bring more relevance into the classroom. Thus the classic instance of threat of decline, producing economies, justified by rejecting an old myth and replacing it with a new one.

What is argued is that by 1976 American higher education was seeking to extend service to all age groups from the teens to the eighties, to all socio-economic, social, ethnic and religious groups, to all variety of talents and aspirations, to all conditions of life, and to people in different stages in their careers. It would offer these services through the rationale of open access to higher education. It would render the services through use of new as well as old techniques of education. It would serve the new students through nontraditional methods of such variety that the entire culture would be considered as learning resources at the disposal of formal higher education. And it would resist constraints placed on institutions as being anti-democratic and denying people their right to whatever kind of education each seemed to want. A controversy, for example, broke out in California when the governor of the state placed limits on state funds which could be used for adult education in junior colleges. The

governor believed that the state was responsible for degree programs which led to a vocation or advanced training and for programs for the young in general, or liberal education. He found the constantly expanding range of activities in adult education programs to be of no state concern. And, of course, the leaders of junior colleges saw in this an attack on the junior colleges as the educational embodiment of the egalitarian ideal.

It appears that the concept of open colleges is being used in this expanded way. It also appears that the expanded definition of what education is and who should receive it is a product of strong democratic or egalitarian sentiments, of warrantable criticism of the traditional higher education but also as a product of formal, organized and institutionalized higher education responding to the conditions of a declining industry.

This declining industry behavior obscures critical social issues. It allows the rhetoric of tragedy to be used if any significant group appears to have needs which are in any way unmet. It encourages institutions and individuals to create new needs in people in place of serving older and more demanding ones. It stimulates catering to people's desires for credentials even if there is already an oversupply of that particular credential. New law schools come quickly to mind. It leads to a redefinition of education which is so broad as to eliminate significant meaning to the term. And especially in public institutions it may very well direct public money away from traditional educational effort into new sorts of activities without the public policy issues ever being made explicit. Using public funds to subsidize upgrading programs for workers in profit-making corporations is a frequently encountered example.

Critical problems exist. While enrollment of young Black students has increased, Blacks are still under-represented in collegiate higher education,

as are Puerto Ricans, Chicanos and native Americans. The institution created to be the open-access institution -- the junior college -- turns out to be a revolving door. Attrition rates at all institutions, except for the most highly selective, remain high and, for the most part, unexplained. The relationship between academic work and subsequent vocational success is perplexing.

These problems are not being solved through the declining industry behavior of search for new markets and offering new products through a changed doctrine. The question is, can they be solved by institutions and individuals who do face serious economic problems? Can they be solved by the 100-year-old liberal arts college which will die unless it generates new income through finding new kinds of students? Can they be solved by the assistant professor who will be denied tenure because enrollments and income are no longer growing? Can they be solved by a junior college which must discharge 30% of its tenured faculty unless it builds up average daily attendance of new, part-time students?

The answer is probably no, and that the declining industry behavior will continue. But a different scenario can be suggested. Institutions of higher education could attempt to return to the core function of education of the young, to the supportive function of creating new knowledge needed for education and for rendering limited services which derive directly from the education and research function. Such a retrenchment could free up resources to be used to insure that the needy young will be accommodated. Very likely the bulk of this effort would have to take place in public institutions because of financial reasons - or in private institutions having considerable capacity. The weakest private institution (excluding, of course, the historically Black institutions) have actually not contributed greatly to expanding access beyond the local community.

That scenario would first see public institutions of all types place all non-degree evening and adult or certificate programs on a full-cost tuition basis as the University of California, University Extension, now is. This would probably result in a decline in enrollments of those kinds of programs because demand is generally considerably less than establishable or assertable need. It would then see institutions, systems of institutions, commissions, legislatures and the Congress seriously and realistically address the barriers preventing the previously excluded groups of the young from entering or completing degree or certificate programs. The problem of priority has partially been solved, although some additional new institutions in the urban and remote areas are needed. But the problems of cost to the individual and cost for support services have not been solved. Even at full funding, basic opportunity grants, and state scholarship programs do not approximate the cost of education which economically disadvantaged youth cannot afford. A combination of increases in those and increases in tuition, coupled with more substantial scholarships based on need, might help. Then radically increased funding of special programs should be sought. There are clear examples of programs which work. The chemical engineering department at MIT and the School of Engineering at the University of Houston each have pilot programs to increase minority group members in engineering. These each involve such things as stipends, carefully structured self-paced courses, freedom from vulnerability to failure, constantly available counseling, cooperative work experience, intense summer catch-up courses and making available minority role models. They work, but they are expensive. The repertoire of educational reform is full of examples which work. Computer-managed courses in principles of economics reduce failures. Intensive semester-long work in a single subject or field for small groups provides great psychological support for the individual. Highly structured counseling programs stressing academic survival almost

eliminates dropouts. Carefully integrated programs of general education during the first two collegiate years succeeds in over two-thirds of the cases in turning risk students into successful matriculants in degree programs. But each of these and others have a much higher per-unit cost than orthodox classroom instruction.

It comes down to a conflict of values. No one disputes that formal learning over a lifetime is good. Few would not be happy that a seventy-year-old finally obtained a bachelors degree from a state college. Only extreme male chauvinists would reject the value of middle-aged women leaving the home to attend college to develop avocational skills. But in the presence of finite resources, where should support go? Here I reject the premise that because Americans spend more on liquor, or whatever, than on education, all that is necessary is to divert some of that money to education. Higher education is an important but limited activity, the support for which is, has been and will be, limited. Where should limited resources go? My own answer is clear. To the young of whatever group, to prepare them to understand, cope with and eventually control a complex, technological society. If that is done, even though human needs and suffering remain, there can be no national educational tragedy.